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A Retrospect.

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THE

WOMEN OF VIRGINIA:

A RETROSPECT.

A LECTURE

DELIVERED BY

ROSAMOND M. SCOTT

AT

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THE WOMEN OF VIRGINIA.

A RETROSPECT.

TO introduce you into a Tennysonian "Palace of Art" and charm your fancy with "A Dream of Fair Women," is not my purpose in this lecture. The theme is, indeed, rich in poetic inspiration, for the matrons and maidens of Virginia have ever been foremost in all the graces and virtues of womanhood. Heroic grandeur as well as lyric beauty has been their crown of glory in the days that are gone, and doubtless will be in the days that are to come.

But as History needs not the assistance of Art to confirm its testimony to this truth, I have passed by the inviting fields of fiction which Thackeray, Kennedy, and others have opened to the imagination in their efforts to reproduce the life of the olden time, and have drawn from historic sources, meagre as they are, the material, or rather the suggestions, out of which I have fashioned my present subject.

The period covered by these observations closes with the social and political cataclysm of 1865, when the course of history seemed to pause, and the things which were (like ripened fruit) parted

and fell away from the things which were to be, and the Old made room for the New.

A writer in the London *Spectator* calls this "The Age of Woman." Now, ordinarily "the age of woman" is not considered a proper subject of discussion. But the writer was wholly innocent of any unpleasant insinuation. He had reference only to the fact that women now-a-days have enlarged their sphere of activity and usefulness beyond all precedent, and have occupied fields of employment hitherto monopolized by the opposite sex.

There are some who will say that this is "a new thing under the sun" in Virginia, and they are the now old-time ladies of whom I am going to tell you presently. But the fact is, the familiar line of Kingsley, that "Men must work and women must weep," grew monotonous, and women found that they could work at least as becomingly, if not as successfully, as they could weep; and so they ventured timidly, yet hopefully, on new lines of industry and enterprise.

It is not their ambition to be the *rivals* of men in any sense, but they simply claim the privilege of being permitted to test their capacities by actual experiment, and of being judged by the result. If they succeed, they are vindicated; if they fail, they have only made mistakes to be avoided in the future. And, now, to my subject.

The phrase, "Women of Virginia," naturally implies some peculiar trait or group of traits which distinguishes them from other women. Did any

such traits exist? And if so, what was their process of development; and when did they acquire a distinctive mark and character?

No doubt the *men* of Virginia had something to do with these important results, and it would not be altogether prudent, perhaps, to leave them out of the account. For without their help I really do not see how there would ever have been any "women of Virginia" at all—of course, I mean *Virginia* women. The princess Pocahontas herself would never have been a *Virginian* if English *men* had not founded a colony in that part of America which they had already named in honor of their virgin queen Elizabeth.

What, then, were the special qualities (or *characters*, as the scientists say) which constituted the typical Virginia woman of 1861?

When we try to get a glimpse of her through the purgatorial glooms that intervene between the *Now* and *Then*, she comes before "the mind's eye," lovely in her majesty, like Beatrice, as Dante saw her descending in the shower of flowers, after he had traversed the horrors of his ghostly pilgrimage. And thus we see her as she *was*. She has no beauty now; perhaps, no hospitable home wherewith to attract and charm the guest of to-day. "What's Hecuba to him, that he should weep for her?" Yet, she was once a very real personage, and her favor was something which a prince might well aspire.

To say that she was the complex product of several factors working together for half a dozen gen-

erations; and that those factors were the combined social and domestic influences under which she was gradually developed in the peculiar conditions of Virginia life, sounds like an identical proposition.

But let me explain; for as a woman is not generally credited with the faculty of reason, I will at once set forth the grounds upon which my conclusions are founded.

First, then, we must consider the immediate influences under which she was born and reared—the influences of her home life. And to these we must add the reflex influence of a servile class, in respect to which she stood very nearly in the relation of sovereign to subject. Secondly, the influence of a class from which she was removed by the differences of social position. And, thirdly, the influence of her own class—the family and friends among whom her real life was spent.

Here, then, are three sets of influences, which, for convenience, we may call the domestic, the political, and the social.

I. And, first, as to her home life.

As the refinement of her nature was inherited, so it was transmitted by inheritance to her daughters and preserved intact within the sacred circle of the family. Her beauty of feature, form and movement resulted naturally from the exuberant health which a salubrious climate and ample means are generally sufficient to secure. She knew nothing then of the cares and heart-troubles that were in store for her. Her pleasure was to please.

She had all the learning and accomplishments

suited to her position. Vocal and instrumental music, together with French, sometimes Spanish or Italian, being indispensable parts of her education. Her music, by the way, was very useful as a means of entertaining her guests, for it might serve to charm a whole company of appreciative listeners, or else be a convenient method of amusing a stupid visitor. For there were stupid visitors in those days, as there are now; but alas! the professional artist has wrenched the sceptre from the hand of the lovely amateur, and transformed it into the business-like *bâton* of the concert hall.

As a matron, she was thoroughly versed in all the arts of housewifery. Both kitchen and dining-room bore testimony at once to the largeness of her bounty and the elegance of her taste. The comfort of her guests was the first consideration, and the claims of hospitality were at all times paramount. But she was not only the maternal head of the family. The ownership and government of slaves developed in her the sense of rulership, in a very high degree, but it, too, was almost maternal in its spirit. For it manifested itself in the graciousness, rather than in the arrogance, of conscious power. The subject race was not to be *governed* only; it was to be provided for and taken care of, and thus she was constantly called upon to exercise those kindly feelings in which the rank of the mistress was often forgotten in the sympathy of the friend. Still, she was never unmindful of the responsibilities of her station, and the habit of command imparted to her demeanor something more than the dignity of the mere gentlewoman.

Hence, if she was queenly in her spirit and bearing, but, at the same time, gracious and condescending, it was because she was made so by the very conditions of her existence.

II. As there was always in Virginia a class of people who were more polished, more wealthy and better educated than some others, so there was, correlatively, another and more numerous class not possessing these advantages, and from them she was separated by sheer force of circumstances. Persons whose sphere of life was below the horizon of her own, were, in fact, if not confessedly, her inferiors, in a very positive, though not in an offensive sense. But in her occasional intercourse with them she never asserted her superiority, because it was mutually understood, and neither haughtiness on the one side, nor envy on the other, disturbed the happy adjustment of their relations to one another.

Noblesse oblige is a maxim as true as it is old and universal. There is something about genuine nobility which compels recognition by its own inherent quality. Everybody appreciates it, and everybody would like to have it. How soon the man of sudden wealth sets about looking for a great-great-grandfather and a coat of arms! Humanity has many strong desires and passions, but none stronger than the desire to have a famous ancestry; and the veriest communist, who, to-day, goes about shrieking his denunciations against the aristocracy, would instantly drop into silence if he could be convinced that he had just inherited a

title. The Constitution of the United States forbids all titles of nobility, and the consequence is, the country is overrun with colonels.

While pride of birth was always a conspicuous feature in the Virginia character, it was never, perhaps, as in England, accompanied by enforced distinctions of rank, as a matter of legal right, still less as a matter of sound policy. The conditions of colonial life drew the people more closely together than they would otherwise have come. Owing to their remoteness from the seat of government, they were, in some respects, an independent community, and not unfrequently all classes had occasion to make common cause against their royal master, or his representatives. Hence the terms of social intercourse were unavoidably modified, to some extent, by political considerations, and thus a more democratic spirit was infused into it.

It would be difficult to understand how Lady Edith of colonial times was content to become plain Mrs. Edith of the Revolution, but for some such sentiment as this, except that patriotism is an instinct of womankind, and women have, moreover, a ready facility of taking sides with their husbands, or fathers, whenever a political question is at issue. And so politics had its influence on society.

There was good reason why the voter, whose support it was important to secure, should, on occasion, be admitted to the hospitality of the mansion, and it was wonderful to see how agreeable Madame could be to the political friend of the Colonel. She would inquire about babies that

had never been born, and express the most lively interest in the welfare of Mrs. Boggs, when Mr. Boggs was only hoping that there might be a Mrs. Boggs in the course of time. But this was not her fault. The Colonel should have taken care that she was better informed about the facts.

Now, all these things enlarged her experience, liberalized her sentiments, made her more versatile in thought and conversation, and fitted her to move with greater ease in her own proper sphere, whenever some Davy Crockett might have a claim upon her courtesies.

III. Thirdly, there was the influence of the class to which she belonged by nature, known as the *élite*, the society, *par excellence*, of Virginia, noted for its liberal culture, its courtly manners, its chivalrous spirit, its elegant hospitality—all together constituting the very paradise of woman, where she presided, if not as a Goddess, at least as the loveliest and noblest of her sex.

Social life, with its visitings, its dinings, its parties, its pic-nics, its weddings, and all the varied modes of amusement and merriment that accompanied them, was the medium in which her graces of person, mind and manner were displayed with an enhanced charm. It was among such scenes as these that the stranger found his memory loved to linger, when, returning home, he undertook to recall the fairest passages of his travel—history—unless, indeed, he were some foreign snob, who felt uncomfortably out of place in the pure atmosphere of Virginia morals and manners.

And so, considered in her totality, our heroine (for I must call her so), was queenly without haughtiness, generous without ostentation, affable with dignity, and wisely practical in all the duties of her station, whether as mistress of a household, or as sovereign disposer of her heart and hand (for she rarely married beneath her social level).

Having now shown *what* she was, it is next in order to inquire *whence* and *how* she acquired her characteristic qualities; and I think it will appear that the typical Virginia woman of 1861 was a special development of the English gentlewoman of the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

I ought, perhaps, to apologize for calling to my assistance a lady of such venerable age, for she is not far from being two hundred and eighty years old. It is almost certain, too, that her style of dress, and especially her style of English, would not be in exact accord with her surroundings, could she appear and speak in bodily form before us. Shakespeare was her contemporary, and it is asserted on high authority, that if we could hear him speak, as he used to, on the stage, we could hardly tell that he was speaking English. Still, our venerable lady was well enough understood in her day, and performed her part on the stage of real life with the most commendable fidelity.

The wives of the gentry under James I. and Charles I., especially in the country, were very different in many ways from the corresponding class of Queen Anne's time. The former were not

only *gentlewomen*, but they were practical, useful, and even industrious housewives; whereas, the latter were noted chiefly for their lack of mental culture, and their indolent, self-indulgent habits.

A correspondent of the (original) *Spectator*, writing under date of October 13, 1714, in the character of an old lady, makes some interesting disclosures on this subject. She says: "I have a couple of nieces under my direction, who so often run gadding abroad that I don't know where to have them. Their dress, their tea, and their visits take up all their time, and they go to bed as tired with doing nothing as I am after quilting a whole petticoat."

What a life! And yet Vanbrugh, Pope, Addison, and Swift all confirm this testimony; and if any one will take the trouble to read "Clarinda's Journal of a Week," in No. 323 of the *Spectator*, he will learn some of the details of which the daily life of a fashionable London woman consisted at that time—say about one hundred and eighty years ago.

But let us go back from fifty to one hundred years further still. The same old lady tells us in her own words: "Those hours which in this age are thrown away on dress, play, visits and the like, were employed in my time in writing recipes, or working beds, chairs, or hangings for the family. * * It grieves my heart to see a couple of proud flirts sipping their tea for a whole afternoon in a room hung around with the industry of their grandmothers."

Sir Roger de Coverley is made to give pretty much the same testimony in behalf of his great-great-grandmother; so that by going back to her times, we shall find that our Virginia womanhood was an outgrowth from the English stock of the earlier and better period. From the fortunate circumstance of being in America, it escaped the bad influences which prevailed in the mother country, and it is very certain that the women of Virginia who lived in the age of Clarinda were more like her great-great-grandmother than herself.

This, then, is the special fact to be noticed—that the same ancestry which produced a Clarinda in England, produced a Mary Washington in Virginia.

The causes of this diversity must be sought in the different influences under which such variant characters were developed, and we find those causes in the peculiar conditions of Virginia life.

Of course, it was many years before those conditions had become so generally and permanently established as to exhibit any marked or distinctive features. The prevalence of peace, law, order, and the consequent feeling of security were essential to this result.

Whatever obscurity may hang about the domestic habits and circumstances of the early settlers, there can be no doubt that the aristocratic element was present and had its influence on society. Of the one hundred and five colonists who originally landed, forty-eight were *gentlemen*, and gentlemen constituted a large percentage of those who afterwards immigrated; although Captain Argall declared some

years later that "A plain soldier that can use a pick and spade is better than five knights, though they were knights that could break a lance."

It does not appear that any women accompanied the first party that located at Jamestown. According to Captain Smith, a ship that landed in 1608, brought "the first gentlewoman and womanservant that arrived in our colony." The next year, Sir Thomas Gates sailed for Virginia with his wife and two daughters, and it is hardly probable they would have ventured into a community where no congenial company was to be found. Later still, in 1622, Lady Wyatt was making preparations to come over, and in 1623, Lady Yeardley appeared in court at Jamestown and released her dower in a tract of land to a purchaser from her then deceased husband.

The inference, therefore, is that there was always a social centre at the colonial capital, from which the refining influences of cultured women were diffused over the social life of the colonists; and that the families of the Governors and Clergy, who had families, were such centres, there can be no question.

But there was another salutary female influence which must not be overlooked. The young women who were sent out from England in 1620–'21, while not shown to be of gentle birth, are described in the official language of the London Company's records as "young, handsome, and honestly educated maids, such as were specially recommended unto the Company for their good bringing up by their parents and friends of good worth."

As the names of those girls were lost in those of their husbands, it is probable that no trace of them remains in their descendants of the present day, if indeed any such descendants survive, and of this there is no evidence, so far as I know.

But, respectable as they undoubtedly were, they were not the first women of that character who came to Virginia as useful rather than as ornamental members of society. Captain Smith, writing in London in 1629, has this to say: "Mistress Pearce, an honest, industrious woman, hath been there (in Virginia) near twenty years, and now returned, saith she hath a garden at Jamestown containing three or four acres, where in one year she hath gathered near an hundred bushels of excellent figs, and that of her own provision, she can keep a better house in Virginia, than here in London for three or four hundred pounds a year, yet she went thither with little or nothing."

Mrs. Pearce must have come to Virginia in 1609, only two years after the first settlement, and she is, as we must admit, a noble and notable representative of the practical and thrifty women who at that early period immigrated to the colony.

Here, then, we have the beginnings of Virginia society; the germs of an upper and a lower class, of gentry and yeomanry, the reproduction of English life as nearly as was practicable under existing conditions. Still, it was, in point of fact, neither English life nor the Virginia life that was to be. The real Virginia life came later.

A period of construction and adaptation followed

the first stage of colonial enterprise and experiment. During the next forty or fifty years, the process of growth and expansion produced its effects. Residence was no longer confined to the palisades at Jamestown. The surrounding country gradually became settled, gentlemen came over from England with their families, obtained large grants of land, located them at the most eligible points, erected stately mansions, purchased slaves, and laid the foundations of what afterwards became the characteristic plantation life of Virginia. As time progressed, agriculture brought increase of wealth, plantations became little principalities, the era of fox-hunting and other manly sports and exercises was inaugurated, and so matters continued until the period of the Revolution, with such changes only as were introduced by the growing civilization of the world.

Meanwhile, the wives of the gentry were learning and performing their part on their own peculiar lines—not only in the matter of hospitality, but in the conduct of their household duties in their several in- and out-door departments; and this is shown by the readiness with which they adapted themselves to the harsh exigencies of a war of invasion, not only making any sacrifice of personal comfort for the cause, but even assuming the management of plantations in the absence of their husbands.

While the women of Virginia were displaying these admirable qualities, the womanhood of England was conspicuous for its swearing Duchesses

and women generally who disliked home occupations and found even their amusements in questionable ways.

Exactly what pre-revolutionary life was in Virginia, we can gather only from such contemporary private writings as happen to have been preserved by the thoughtfulness of a few who realized that future generations would feel some interest in the small things of the past.

In our State Library we have such a record in the reminiscences of Mrs. Maxwell Read, from whose lips, at the age of eighty-three, they were taken down by her son and committed to writing, but never published. Her narrative, while not so full as we would desire, is graphic and vivacious, and shows a bright, cheerful, and observant mind. She was born in Norfolk in 1750, and, like most girls of the period, married at the age of seventeen, but she tells us that she had been well instructed by her mother "in the mysteries of housewifery, and taught to make pies, puddings, jellies, and all sorts of niceties, at which she was an apt scholar"; and so, very different from the contemporary English maiden.

Her father was wealthy and hospitable, and used to entertain all strangers of any note that came to the city, and especially the officers of the British navy who visited the waters of Virginia before the war. Among them she mentions Captain, afterwards Admiral, Gell, who commanded a fifty-gun ship with thirty-two midshipmen on board, "mostly boys and lads of good families, and several of them

sprigs of nobility." They came frequently to her father's house and dined there, and, *apropos* of that, she describes a lively scene that might well have happened a hundred years later. "Sometimes," she tells us, "they would go into the kitchen to get a little something to stay their appetites, when old Quashabee would assert her authority and threaten to pin a dish-cloth to their young lordships if they did not get out of her way. Nay, she would now and then carry her threat into execution, and actually fasten one of these badges of a cook's wrath upon one or other of them to the great diversion of all the rest. I recall particularly a young stripling by the name of Lord George Gordon, afterwards so famous as the leader of the riots in London, whom I have seen begging old Quashabee for a piece of the skin which she had just taken off the ham she was about to send into the house for dinner, and eating it with great relish."

Years afterwards, when the Revolution was flagrant, and the British had occupied Norfolk, Captain Maxwell removed his family to New Kent county, and it is here only that she gives us any glimpse of country life. Her temporary home was about a mile from Colonel Dandridge's residence, (the brother of Mrs. Washington) and she soon became acquainted with his family.

On one occasion, she tells us (I use her own language), "Mrs. Dandridge came over to invite me to spend a day with Lady Washington, who had come down to pass some days at her house in hopes

of seeing her husband, the General, who was expected to call on his way to Yorktown." Indisposition prevented Mrs. Maxwell from accepting the invitation, but a few days afterwards, she and her husband set out on foot to make the visit, hoping they might meet General Washington there, but they found he had not stopped to see his wife, "being more anxious just then to see the British army." But she proceeds: "To make up for the disappointment, after we had taken our leave and just as we had gotten through the great gate into the high road, what should we see but the young Marquis De La Fayette at the head of a large troop of horse, the finest sight I ever saw. The Marquis was then a fine looking young man—he could not have been more than twenty—with a ruddy face and light sandy hair, and rode an elegant horse."

More might be quoted from this narrative that would be deeply interesting, but this much will suffice to illustrate, in some degree at least, the character of the pre-revolutionary Virginia woman and the sphere in which she moved. And we find her intelligent, practical, fond of society and fitted to adorn it, nor must we suppose that because Mrs. Maxwell lived in Norfolk, she had any special advantage over the ladies of the country. Country life, indeed, was that which was most distinctively Virginian. Here was the home of the wealthy planter, who delighted in extending all hospitable courtesies, and imported directly from abroad all the luxuries of table, wardrobe and library that constituted the highest style of living, and that too in the amplest abundance.

English travellers, who visited Virginia at that period, were struck with this fact, and contrasted the refinement and affluence of high life in Virginia with the inferior condition of the other colonies in those respects. Among many other observers, the late historian Green remarks: "The distinction between the northern and southern colonies was more than an industrial one. In the Southern States the prevalence of slavery produced an aristocratic spirit and favored the creation of large estates, and among the wealthy planters of Virginia many of the older English families found representatives in houses such as Fairfax and Washington." At the North, aristocratic life was confined almost exclusively to the cities or their vicinity.

The return of peace, crowned with the trophies of a splendid success, of course added a new charm and spirit to the pleasures of social intercourse, and it is almost amusing to observe how quickly the ladies apprehended the situation and turned their attention to the latest London fashions.

All this was only natural, and we may be assured that the women of the time were well mated with the men whose wisdom and valor established the independence of the country—and, by the way, when Patrick Henry said "country," he always meant Virginia. The mother who bore the noblest of the Virginians belonged to the century of the Revolutionists, and when her illustrious son married Mary Custis in 1831, doubtless the "radiant maidens" who graced the wedding festivities with their presence, were the peers of their mothers in

every point, and were so confessed by those who had known them both in their youthful beauty.

But she who was the bride of sixty years ago lived to be the matron of our own time, and found it not unworthy of her; for the typical Virginia woman of 1861 only ceased to be a princess that she might become more truly—a woman.

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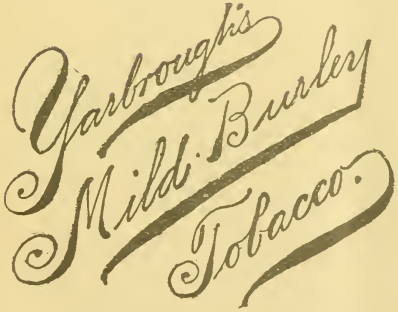

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